THE SHIP FROM YUCATAN

By Miss *CARRA CALSTOCK*

PART 3: MY FATHER & CATRINA

6th June 1841.

June had become one characterised by lightning and driving rain, which served to punctuate stretches of blissful sunshine and soft breezes from the sea. They carried with them the intoxicating, heady scent of salt and adventure. On such days, I insisted upon clearing the rainwater from a lawn chair for myself, and would sit in the sun, at times reading and others merely enjoying

The air. Having finished with my compendium of tales from the east, I had found myself overcome with a curiosity around my artefact of the new world. Despite, or perhaps because of, the grisly engraving that adorned the medallion, my interest was piqued and I had a yearning to know more of the minds that produced it. Alas, Father's library offered little to sate my curiosity. I thought perhaps to venture to Torstow, to seek out Valdez. Such efforts, of course, were futile - no doubt the Spaniard had departed on a new voyage. My other recourse would have been to request of Mattley that he procure a volume concerning the peoples of the Americas, although doing so would have required him to discuss the matter with Father, and by the time the correspondence would have reached his townhouse he would have surely arrived at the Torstow manor.

And then it was Wednesday, and Father's carriage arrived! Had it not been on a frail day, where the ague weighed so heavily upon my form, I feel I should have dashed to the carriage before the door had been opened. As things were, however, I found myself able to stand upright and take careful, lead-footed steps towards my father as he disembarked.

His gaze met mine. He had a stern visage, I have always recalled that of him; the face of a man whose lot in life is the pursuit of wealth and the difficult decisions that come therewith; a man whose lot, ultimately, is self-sacrifice for the sake of his dependents. Perhaps it was this thought that led me to see a shade of sorrow in his expression, that the sight of my lumpen gait, the effort that must have been visible in me, were proof that all the wealth in England cannot ease the lot of one afflicted such as I. Dear Father, should you ever read this, please know that I have always tried my hardest.

If Father truly held disappointment or concern, it was not long before these were quenched utterly as his face lightened and cracked into a broad smile. Eschewing etiquette, he crossed to me and drew me into a tight and loving embrace.

'O Briar, sweet child, it's been far too long!' His hand warm against my cheek. Beyond his teeth I knew lay the promise often made yet never kept; that the time between his next visit will be measured in weeks rather than months. At this age, I had gone from credulity to disbelief and since further progressed to believe that Father meant the words when he spoke them, but was too plagued by the distractions of industry. Else, this was merely a façade, spoken in pursuit of mutual comfort, and over time I have learned to appreciate this effort. Pray think me not a cynic for being of this understanding; simply I appreciate the order of things, and am not so selfish as to demand time that is not mine.

Following from greeting me, but before we engaged with the business of how we each had passed the time since his last visit in April, my father half-turned and indicated the still open carriage.

There I saw, being helped down from the carriage by Father's man Tanner, was a young woman, little older than myself. She was tall, perhaps equal to Tanner in height, and had the oddest angular features, as one might were they a statue half coaxed from the stone by the sculptor's hand.

'I found this young lady walking the roads between here and Torstow,' Father explained, sotto voce, 'she's journeyed here from the new world. Her ship wrecked in the last storm.'

'The … new world?' My thoughts had immediately flown to my medallion. Better than a manual, providence had brought to me a person who may help me decipher the meaning behind the macabre icon!

Perhaps mistaking my wonder for trepidation, Father bade me not worry; 'She's not at all savage, and speaks English near as well as you or I. I've told her that she can stay here as a guest and companion to you, until such time as she can secure passage and resume her journey. Come, introduce yourself.'

I found myself overcome with a sudden flutter of shyness. Due to my condition, much of my life had been carefully curated to avoid undue excitement such as the reception of guests. I, of course, trusted Father's judgement of character completely, and as he suggested this newcomer stay under our roof, I had no reason for bashfulness. I gathered my effort to keep my gait steady and ladylike, I approached our guest from the new world.

She regarded me with eyes that seemed at once tired and filled with the queerest burning. Maybe some quirk of her people, or perhaps something unique to her being, but I felt near rooted to the spot, transfixed as I was looked through, almost, but alongside this understood in a manner so deep that I can scarce explain it. Indeed, to attempt to relate it now seems churlish; the enormity of such an undertaking defies language, or at least my mastery thereof.

Remembering the etiquette Ms Ida had drummed into me, and aware that I was staring, I summoned enough of myself to make an introduction, but before I spoke our guest had turned to Father.

'Is Miss Briar?' She enquired of him. Her voice sounded equally alien and comfortingly familiar to my ear, her accent carried some of the buzz and burr I recalled in Valdez, though feminine and weaved in with a keening melancholy which served to cut right to my heart.

In short, I fancied this the voice of the unbidden thoughts I'd had as I lay on the carpet, though I would never admit to having such thoughts, let alone entertaining them. I felt myself growing flustered, and a blush crept up my neck in prickly steps. It's merely a voice, silly girl, I told myself.

'You must forgive my Briar,' Father came to my rescue before I said something foolish. 'She is not in the habit of receiving guests, and appears to have been struck shy.'

'Charmed,' I managed. I extended a hand in greeting, then was gripped at once by the thought that this may not be a common greeting among her people.

My doubts were founded, instead of shaking my hand, the lady from the new world took my hand and held it.

'I too am charmed. They called me Catrina, on the boat.' The hand with which she took mine was large, with long and slender fingers, and cool to the touch. 'I have another name, of my people, which I was told is difficult to pronounce. You may call me Catrina, if you wish.'

'I do wish,' Upon her hand meeting mine, I had a curious sense of serenity, as if I'd known the young lady for years. I offered a smile, thinking perhaps that her people would be familiar with the gesture. 'It's a joy to make your acquaintance, Catrina.'

Catrina said that, for her, it was also a joy. She returned the smile in the manner of one seemingly unused to the act; while her mouth curled, the deep dark pools of her eyes retained their steady melancholy. The overall effect was one of gracious sorrow, as one might picture on the face of some tragic Romantic heroine. I found this disarming, to such an extent that I was left with a sudden light head.

Father, assumedly satisfied that Catrina would be a suitable companion for me, instructed Ms Ida to have a spare room made up before bidding us a good afternoon and leaving us in search of Mattley.

I took Catrina to the parlour, on the promise of a proper tour of the house tomorrow when she wasn't weary from travel, and immediately made quite the fool of myself in attempting to move a chair so that we both might sit by my favoured window.

Catrina brushed the dust from my skirts for me, and asked between bursts of short, bright laughter why I did not simply have one of Father's men do it. Amid heavy breaths - in part from my own laughter at my foolishness, but in the main because the exertion had aggravated my ague and left me somewhat wretched - I explained that with Ms Ida and Mattely occupied, we had no house staff free, and would be waiting quite a while.

Not wanting to wait, Catrina finished moving the chair as my head had begun to swim and I had grown short of breath. Oh, how I had hoped to, if only for a short while, to have a companion who knew nothing of my frailties. How foolish, to hope.

Regarding me patiently, Catrina sat with me as I related the nature of my condition. She blinked rarely, a fact I noted for the first time here in the parlour. Her gaze did not once leave my face, and for the first time in many years, I felt that my ague was not a burden, but merely a part of me, as much as my skin or teeth or hair.

When I had finished my account, Catrina leant across the space between our chairs to take my hand. In the softest voice, she said 'It must be so hard, to fight each day.'

Dear reader, my heart nearly burst on the spot! To be so understood, by one a mere afternoon from being a perfect stranger. I told her simply that I must; it is my nature, but moreover, God wills that we face each of life's challenges with all we have.

Of course, it had never crossed my mind that Catrina would be a heathen, or else from a civilisation yet being raised out of barbarism by the Church. Maybe she did not understand what I meant. It was with no rebuke or judgement in her voice that she asked me simply:

'Why?'

END OF PART THREE